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ABSTRACT

There are continuing debates about the best approach to teaching reading--phonics or whole language. The most valuable link to learning to read is phonological or phonemic awareness, as soon as the alphabetic system is mastered. After phonemic awareness has been established, students enter the orthographic stage where they can process longer strings of letters. Also important is a learning environment where students' anxiety should be kept low while they are motivated to read. Good teachers will arm their students with different tools to help them learn to decode words, including: using phonics, recognizing sight words, and using the context. The best way for beginning readers to become proficient readers is to read. There are many different paths that lead to creating successful, proficient readers. Beyond some phonics instruction, which has been deemed absolutely necessary, the way to nurture a beginning reader is left to the instructor. Whether a basal, language-experience or whole language approach is used, the result can be the same, proficient readers. It is important for the teacher to understand the evolution of beginning readers and give students the tools necessary to decode. (Contains eight references.) (CR)

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Baseline for Beginning Readers

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Arguably, the most important thing a student learns in school is how to read. Reading is fundamental to modern living, and without the knowledge to read, many of life's opporunities and joys will be closed off to these students. There are continuuing debates about the best approach to teaching reading. Phonics advocates insist that without explicit and systematic phonics instruction, the students will have a difficult time learning how to read. Whole language supporters, on the other hand, believe that phonics should not be taught directly, but only when questions about pronounciation arise from the real literature that the students read. After witnessing different approaches to teaching reading, educators can conclude that it does not necessarily matter which methods are used to teach students to read, but to ensure that emergent readers will become and early readers, and then blossom into proficient readers.

Students do not learn to read suddenly; it is a process that starts when the child is very young. Noam Chomsky concluded that a child has all the rules for all possible languages in their brain, and learns from experience which rules apply to the culture that is their own (Collins, 1997). Children are surrounded by oral language, as well as print from billboards to books, which helps them reach a level of readiness to learn to read (Gunning, 1996). Before students start to read, they must have several concepts in place. These include developing concepts of print (i.e. words are made of letters, sentences are made from words, and reading is done from top to bottom and left to right). Also metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness must be present. That is, students must be able to think about thinking, and to reflect about the concept of language. This includes knowing that sentences begin with capital letters and end with a punctuation mark, and also that words are separated by spaces (Gunning, 1996).

The most valuable link to learning to read is phonological awareness. First, students need to know the alphabetic system, that the marks on the page are really letters that make up our alphabet (Ehri, 1997). After that is mastered, then phonemic awareness must be addressed. Students must realize that a word can be broken up into individual sounds (the smallest unit of sound is called a phoneme). The English language has 44 phonemes (Collins, 1997), and without the understanding that the letters in the alphabet represent these different sounds, then students will not be able to understand what reading is about and will probably become poor readers. In fact, there is a direct correlation between phonemic awareness and later reading achievement. Those who excell in phonemic awareness will most likely become successful readers and spellers (Ehri, 1997). Activities to heighten and reinforce phonological awareness include rhyming games, segmenting words into their individual sounds, and emphasizing beginning consonant sounds (Gunning, 1997). After phonemic awareness has been established, students enter the orthographic stage where they can process longer strings of letters. Students start connecting frequently encountered words with the spoken sound, and no longer have to break them up into their individual components (i.e. when they read *ran* it is no longer broken up into /r/ /a/ /n/). This is the moment when words become "sight words." Having a large base of sight words will help early readers to become proficient readers (Gunning, 1997).

There are important, less technical, aspects of guiding a beginning reader. One of them is the environment in which students learn. According to Krashen, each student's affective filter must be kept low. An affective filter is an invisible shield that raises when anxiety is present. If the filter is raised, then little, if any, learning will take place. To keep the filter in a lowered position, the student must be calm and relaxed (Baker, 1996). Now that the student is comfortable

and motivated to read, the teacher must make sure that the emergent reader will experience success when they read. This means monitoring the level of books that the student reads. Material that is too difficult will cause frustration and a feeling that the student can't read. By keeping the reading material challanging, but readable, the teacher will ensure that the student will want to keep on reading. The classroom should also stimulate the student to want to read, and that means a print rich environment and an extensive and varied classroom library. Despite the physical (and mental) environment in which students read, learning to read comes down to one thing, students learn to read by reading (Gunning, 1996).

Good teachers will arm their student with different tools to help them learn to decode words, for proficient readers will use multiple strategies when reading (MacGillivray, 1997). These tools for word recognition include using phonics (sounding out the word), recognizing sight words (being able to remember words that the student has encountered frequently), and using the context (figuring out the word by using the rest of the sentence as a clue). Techniques such as guided reading, whereby the teacher literally guides the students through the reading of a book, will help beginning readers practice where and when to use these tools (The Wright Group, 1995).

So, when does a beginning reader advance to a proficient reader? Again, this does not happen overnight, but is an ongoing process. Proficient readers have some common characteristics; they are confident in their ability to read and they like to read, indeed, they see reading as a fun activity. When watching a proficient reader read, one will see that the student is able to decode the words efficiently. By using different methods, depending on the word, proficient readers will be able to decipher many unfamiliar or unknown words. Reading will

become automatic, not a labored affair with the student sounding out every letter of every word. Another, very important characteristic of proficient readers is that when reading aloud one can hear them self-correct if misreading a word (MacGillivray, 1997). By processing what they are reading, they will hear when there is an error in their reading. The student will then pause, and re-read the sentence, this time inserting the correct word. The tool they use to do this (be it phonics, using context or by recognizing a sight word) is up to them, and part of being a proficient reader is to know which method to use to decode an unknown or unfamiliar word.

Once a reader advances to proficient reader state, it does not mean that the learning is over. There are many more things that proficient readers will need to know in order to advance in their reading ability. Syllabication (dividing words into syllables) will become a necessary tool when the student starts encountering multisyllabic words. Being able to recognize affixes, compound words, as well as, knowing simple rules for dividing multisyllabic words, will help the proficient reader decode long words (Gunning, 1996). Another advanced tool for proficient readers is morphemic analysis. A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning, and morphemic analysis is when a word is broken up into its root and affixes, and then decoded. Knowing root words can unlock the door to knowing many other words containing the root word. The number of sight words and vocabulary words of proficient readers should continually be increasing to ensure fluency of reading as the reading material gets more difficult.

The best way for readers to become proficient readers is to read. There are many different paths that lead to creating successful, proficient readers. Beyond some phonics instruction, which has been deemed absolutely necessary, the way to nurture a beginning reader is left to the

instructor. Whether a basal, language-experience or whole language approach is used, the result can be the same, proficient readers. What is important is that the teacher understands the evolution of beginning readers, and gives students the tools necessary to decode. Beyond that, if a teacher can instill a passion for reading and a thirst for knowledge, then the teacher has given her students the world.

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